BOB EDWARDS AND I

By

Robert Pearson

My friendship with Bob Edwards started in 1904 and continued until his death in 1922. During all that period there were three of us who shared the intimacies of his life. The other two, Jimmy Reilly and W. M. Davidson, Editor of the Calgary Albertan, have, like Bob, passed on.

I came to meet Bob first as a result of one of his periodical outbursts that not only hampered his work, but greatly shortened his life. It was like this: I had gone to Banff in June, 1904, as a Methodist missionary. I had been told by Dr. R. G. Brett (later Lieutenant-Governor) that he had Bob staying at the old Banff Sanitarium. I was also told by my superiors that one of my duties was to call on all the people who were temporarily resident there. I had seen a few copies of the Eye Opener which had been published in Calgary for about a year, and so, either through curiosity or missionary zeal, I called on the one and only Bob Edwards. His eyes twinkled when I told him who I was and the position I held. However, I found him interesting, and he must have found me not half-bad, for he asked me to call again.

Bob made another visit to Banff in the spring of 1906. On this occasion he had fled from the wrath of none other than R. B. Bennett, now the noble viscount. R. B. (as he was familiarly called in Calgary) and Hon. W. H. Cushing were running for the Calgary seat in the legislature of the newly formed Province of Alberta. Bob's Eye Opener had been banned from sale on the C.P.R. trains because of an attack he made on the officials of the Grand Trunk Pacific. It seems the officials were supposed to have mixed pleasure with the hunt for a terminus that resulted in the choice of Prince Rupert. Bob appealed to R.B., who was C.P.R. solicitor, to get his paper put back on the trains. R.B., apparently, either did not try or had failed in an attempt, with the result that Bob brought out an issue on the morning of the election attacking R.B. and urging the election of Cushing. A Tremendously striking cartoon accompanied the article. In the meantime Bob had left for Banff, where he produced the edition of the Eye Opener, and remakred to Dr. Brett and myself, "I slaughtered Bennett before I left Calgary, and here is the article that did it." Dr. Brett who was running in Banff on the same ticket as R.B. said, "You'll get a surprise. Bennett will bob up tonight with a thousand majority." I can still see Bob's face as he exultantly replied, "He can't do it. I slaughtered him." Sure enough, Cusing won by a small majority.

Under the act that granted Alberta autonomy, Edmonton was selected as Provincial Capital, but the final site was to be settled by a vote of the legislature. The distribution of seats gave Edmonton a tremendous advantage. Dr. R . G. Brett, who had been a member of the Legislature of the North West Territories, started an agitation to have Banff selected. He had many arguments among which, the one I remember best, was that American capitols were usually in small cities.

When the capitol debate was on, Bob Edwards went to Edmonton to hear it. Dr. Brett felt isolated at Banff and went to Calgary. Bob had promised to wire Brett the results of the vote the moment it was registered. Impatiently Dr. Brett waited. Finally a wire was delivered to him from Edmonton which he read breathlessly. The wire said: "Banff selected capitol, vote sixteen to eight." But Dr. Brett believed it was wise to check the information. As a result of the check he sent a wire to Bob: "Consult Dr. Braithwaite, will be up on next train."

From Bob, Governor Brett received another wire on the morning of the opening the the Legislature in 1918. W. J. Harmer had been appointed to the Senate, and Bob did not approve of the appointment, so he wired to the Governor: "Don't forget, in the speech from the throne, to thank Providence for Harmer's appointment to the Senate, and also express thanks that Jimmy Reilly will still be with us."

In the summer of 1907 I was living in Calgary, and the newly organized Canadian Club, with W. L. Walsh (later Justice and Lieutenant-Governor) as president, decided that on July first they would present a national flag to the city of Calgary to be hung in Central Park. Bob asked me to come with him to the ceremony as he had two seats at the front where provision had been made for distinguished people. The seats were arranged so that the people sat with their backs to the hot morning sun, but the speakers, R. B. Bennett and Dr. A. O. McRae, looked right into it. I had never heard R.B. speak and was all interest since I had been told that never since Demosthenes and Cicero had there been anyone who could amaze the gazing rustics as could R.B. But no one could speak well against that sun, and while the redoubtable Mr. Bennett told his story of the two bands of steel linking together the Provinces and making a united Canada, he did not appear to be at ease. After the crowd dispersed Bob said to me, "Don't judge Mr. Bennett on that effort." Then he remarked, "R.B. has one great misfortune as a speaker . . ." I waited for him to go on. Finally he added, "He has the great misfortune of being eloquent."

The real crisis in Bob's life came in 1908. He was going strong and his paper had a large circulation. Dan McGillicuddy, a year or so before, had started a daily paper called the Calgary Daily News. Dan had previously published a paper in a town near my home in Huron County, and was noted for calling a spade a spade, and not an agricultural implement. His son, Owen,

worked with him on the paper and aspired to be a poet. He had been accused by an eastern paper of plagiarism, and Bob published the account in the Eye Opener. Dan was waiting for a chance to get even. The opportunity came.

The 1908 Dominion elections were on, and Clifford Sifton (later Sir Clifford), formerly Minister of the Interior, was running in Brandon. Bob had for some reason made a habit of attacking Mr. Sifton personally. Clifford expected that Bob would take the opportunity of the election to continue his assaults. He feared that Bob would flood the constituency of Brandon with Eye Openers calculated to ruin the Sifton chances. He, therefore, took counter measures, and one day the front page of the Calgary Daily News carried the most vicious and vituperative article ever written in Canada, or that ever came from the pen of man. It was an attack on Bob, raking him fore and aft, likening him to the most vile characters in history or fiction. What Bob would do about it was the question of the hour. He had often put the harpoon into others, how would he take this attack on himself? We did not have long to wait. Bob swore out a warrant and had McGillicuddy arrested for criminal libel.

The trial of this action was one of the most interesting ever held in Calgary, and I spent a whole week on a bench at the back of the courtroom in the old Calgary Courthouse. Judge Beck was the presiding judge, and a six-man jury assisted him in reaching a verdict. Paddy Nolan acted for Bob, while

Dan McGillicuddy brought E. P. Davies from Vancouver and Clifford Sifton's personal lawyer -- I think his name was Gilmour -- from Brandon to defend him.

Many witnesses, pro and con, were examined. Files of the Eye Opener were presented as exhibits. E. P. Davies, who for personal reasons had no love for Bob, took the occasion to pour his invective upon Bob who was nowseeking redress from this scurrilous attack. In his address to the jury Davies would walk over to the box and explain something to them and in the middle of the explanation he would, as if overcome with emotion at what Bob had written at various times, rush over to where Bob was sitting, point his finger down at him and shout, "This skunk! this scamp! this scoundrel! attacks everybody else and can't take it himself!" You had to hear the dramatic effect made by Davies as he shouted the three words: Skunk! Scamp! Scoundrel! to get the full effect of the two hour attack.

Paddy Nolan, on the other hand, was not very impressive. He accused Davies of dragging a red herring across the trail, and based his argument largely on the fact that we had courts where any of the people Bob had attacked could have come and sought redress. He said that McGillicuddy had taken the law into his own hands and must be judged for what he had written, not for what Edwards had done.

The jury brought in a double verdict, finding McGillicuddy guilty, but adding a rider stating that Edwards should also be checked from writing as he did.

Mr. Justice Beck imposed a nominal fine on McGillicuddy, approved of the rider and warned Edwards to be more careful what he wrote in the future.

Bob seemed stunned by the whole procedure and from that time on judged his friends by those who had stood by him during his trouble. The humiliation was too much and Bob left Calgary. He went to the head of the Lakes, but he didn't like it there and came back to Calgary where he continued to publish his paper until he died.

Bob told me that he never read the McGillicuddy article. He just read the first few lines in which Dan dealt with the necessity of skinning a skunk if there was to be any profit. He then seemed to go paralyzed and sent for Jimmy Reilly and asked him to read the rest. Jimmy gave Bob an idea of the attack, and without wasting any more time Bob went to Paddy Nolan and had the warrant prepared. Bob also told me, and I believed what he said, that any further attack by McGillicuddy would mean the death of the proprietor of the News. I have never repeated this threat, but from the venom that Bob hurled now and again at Dan in later years, I could well believe he might have done Dan injury.

Just before the McGillicuddy affair, Bob found out that I was getting married. He brought me a copy of Burns' Poems on the front of which he had written: "To Robert Pearson, from R. C. Edwards, on the occasion of his marriage -- the former's -- Sept. 1908."

In 1909 I left Calgary for Edmonton. There appeared a note in the Eye Opener in which Bob apologized for chronicling church events, but explained why he made this exception and wound up by saing, "Bob (Pearson), being a total abstainer will find it very lonesome in Edmonton."

During the four years that I was away from Calgary I made many visits to the city and always called on Bob. In 1913 I took over the Secretaryship of the Calgary Y.M.C.A. and so was only a block from his quarters in the Cameron Block. Bob's lapses seemed to be more frequent, and he came to rely much more on my help. Sometimes he would get Jimmy Reilly and somethimes me. We usually called a friend who had a car and had Bob put in the hospital where he could get attention. His sobering-up beverage was always ginger ale, and it had to be a special kind that was made in Ireland. It was carried by the Great West Liquor Store, and I often bought it there for him and took it to the hospital. I used to sneak out of the store with the parcel under my arm and pray that no one would see me.

On one occasion I was taken to the hospital with a very severe case of tonsilitis and was put in the room

adjoining Bob's. The doctor who was treating him said, "Do you know who is in the adjoining room?" Bob looked up and the doctor continued, "Bob Pearson." Bob looked greatly puzzled for a time and then said, "Is he on a bat, too?"

Bob and I were opponents in the election for the Provincial Legislature in 1921. Mr. Davidson, Editor of the Calgary Albertan, arranged for the four Independents who were running for election to put an article on a certain page every day. On this page, at the top, was Bob Edward's picture and what he would do if elected. My picture and article was next, and Mr. Adshead and Mrs. Gale were below. I don't imagine anyone read beyond Bob's article, but we wrote religiously, nevertheless. R.B. Bennett was a friend of both Bob's and mine at the time, but he had to support the five Conservative candidates. Bob and I had always voted for R.B., so one night when he was speaking on behalf of the Conservatives, he said, "It may be that you do not want to support the whole five Conservative candidates. If you do not want to vote for all five, don't go and vote for the Liberals. Vote for Bob Edwards or Bob Pearson." Too many of them must have heeded R.B.'s advice, for the five Conservatives were all defeated, while Bob and I were elected.

When it came time for us to go to Edmonton for the session, Bob requested that I get a room in the same hotel, so we got adjoining rooms in the C.J.R. Lodge on 109 Street. Being the only two Independent members we were also seat mates.

Bob requested that I assist him in keeping sober. He said, "A lot of people think I can't keep sober, and I want to show them I can." He received invitations from several of his old cronies to attend little dinner parties with them. He never refused and said it would be lovely, and then told me I had to get him out of the engagement. He said, "Tell them anything you like, but if I go they will make me drink." I managed to get him out of his invitations by little social fibs.

He made only one speech in the Legislature and that was to repeal the Prohibition Act that was in force. He gave a very clever address and spoke well. At the close of the session all the members rushed up to congratulate him. That evening he said to me, "What wouldn't I give just to be able to celebrate the event!" However, he did not, and finished the Legislature very good friends with everyone and extremely popular.

He was terribly hurt when he read in a Prohibition paper a criticism of his address and several slurs on him, one of which indicated that he spoke as if he had had too much to drink at the time. He had not had anything. He seemed sore at me for a time and thought I ought to have been able to prevent such a slander. Shortly after this he fell off the water wagon and went to the hospital. When he returned he was quite a wreck, but was able to attend a short summer session, though his heart beat like a trip hammer, and he was under most rigid doctor's orders.

About two weeks before his death, I visited him on the veranda of his home, and he started telling me that he was soon going to kick in. I didn't think he was in immediate danger and told him so. It was then that he told me if he passed out he wanted me to take charge of everything, and to have no one but myself take any part in his funeral. He said, "I can depend on you." This promise caused me considerable embarrassment later because there were two ministers in Calgary who were friendly with him.

At first we were going to have his funeral from the undertaking parlors, but when we heard that Lieutenant-Governor Brett and Premier Greenfield, besides cabinet ministers, judges, mayors, and members of the legislature wanted to be present, Sandy Russell, who was also a friend, and I went into hurried conference. First we thought of Central Church, then we decided that since Bob did not attend church we would make other arrangements. He had been elected Honorary President of the War Vetrans and had attended some of their smokers, so we asked for the Memorial Hall. We chose six members of the Legislature as Honorary Pallbearers and six members of the Mounted Police as active Pallbearers, since he loved the Mounted Police and wrote many interesting articles about them. Even the large hall proved to be too small and there was an overflow on the street. One of those in the crowd outside was R. B. Bennett.

There is no space to give a digest of what I said at Bob's funeral, but I spoke for twenty minutes and every remark I made was a sincere statement. My closing remarks in the Memorial Hall were, "We are burying the most unique character Alberta has ever possessed. People will come and people will go, but we will never look upon his like again."

When everyone else had left his graveside, I found myself standing on the hill beside the Macleod Trail with Joe Adair, another Scott, who had come from Edmonton to attend the funeral. Just recently Joe reminded me of our conversation at the grave. He had said, "Don't you think Bob would be satisfied with the funeral you have given him?" As I looked to the south and to the northeast my eyes took in not only the vista but Calgary's two breweries and, according to Joe, I remarked, "Bob would have said,'What do you mean, planting me between these two breweries!'" At least if there was ever a chance to make a humorous remark, Bob would not have passed it up.